

191 Hits

by Brandon Kruse

I found myself thinking recently about a passage from the writings of Bill James, the man often referred to as the "father of modern baseball analysis." It goes like this:

Let us start with the number 191 in the hit column, and with the assertion that it is not possible for a flake (I would hope that no one reading this doesn't know what a flake is) to get 191 hits in a season. It is possible for a warthog to do this. It is possible for a bastard to do this. It is possible for many people whom you would not want to marry your sister to do this. But to get 191 hits in a season demands (or seems to demand, which is as good for the drama) a consistency, a day-in, day-out devotion, a self-discipline, a willingness to play with pain and (to some degree) a predisposition to the team game which is wholly inconsistent with flakiness.

First of all, it's a wonderful example of the quality of James's writing, filled with humor and keen observations. Beyond that, it's an intriguing supposition. The flake hypothesis immediately brings to mind Manny Ramirez, who is without question one of the greatest flakes in the history of the game, and, as fate would have it, has never collected 191 hits in a single season.

But it's the other hypothesis, the part about the various rogues and scoundrels who are perfectly capable of racking up 191 hits in a season, that captured my imagination. I wondered if it really held up to scrutiny. As I scanned through the list of single-season hit leaders in baseball history, the answer was a readily-apparent yes. So in that spirit, I give you a look at some of the less admirable players ever to post 191 hits or more in a baseball season, and an assessment of just what particular brand of warthog they were:

Derek Bell

Played: 1991-2001

Teams: Blue Jays, Padres, Astros, Mets, Pirates

191+ Hit Seasons: 1 (1998)

Bell pretty much made a career out of being a malcontent, but he set himself apart from the great whiny masses of unhappy athletes in 2002 with one of the best pieces of unintentional comedy in the history of baseball. Bell, in the second year of a contract with the Pirates, had hit just .173 the season before, and early word out of spring training was that he would have to beat out some challengers to keep his starting job.

So reporters converged on Bell at his houseboat (yes, he was actually living on a houseboat at the time) to get his reaction to the news. It turned into pure gold: "Nobody told me I was in competition. If there is competition, somebody better let

me know. If there is competition, they better eliminate me out of the race and go ahead and do what they're going to do with me. I ain't never hit in spring training and I never will. If it ain't settled with me out there, then they can trade me. I ain't going out there to hurt myself in spring training battling for a job. If it is [a competition], then I'm going into 'Operation Shutdown.' Tell them exactly what I said. I haven't competed for a job since 1991."

So it was that "Operation Shutdown" entered the baseball lexicon. Bell walked out on the Pirates near the end of spring training, they released him two days later (paying him \$4.5 million not to play for them), and he never played in the majors again. (Prompting the following beautiful line from Pittsburgh Post-Gazette sports columnist Mark Madden: "Derek Bell becomes the ultimate Pirate: Lives on a boat and steals money.")

Derek Bell was an asswipe.

Albert Belle

Played: 1989-2000

Teams: Indians, White Sox, Orioles

191+ Hit Seasons: 1 (1998)

When it came to making headlines for the wrong reasons, Belle was a veritable prodigy. He started at age 20, during the College World Series, responding to a fan who had been shouting racist insults at him by going into the stands to attack him, one of the ultimate sports no-nos. Proving he had learned at least a partial lesson, a few years later in the majors, Belle just threw a baseball at a heckling fan that had apparently been getting on the volatile outfielder about his alcohol rehab. Again, not really the proper response, but still: good aim!

Fans weren't the only ones who received free, violently-hurled souvenirs from Belle – he once fired a baseball at a photographer who had the gall to take his picture (and possibly steal his soul). And for most of his career, he refused to speak to the press and often shouted profanities at them. While he was with Cleveland, the Indians reportedly billed him \$10,000 a year for damage he caused to clubhouses – both at home and on the road. He often took a bat to post-game spreads, and once to teammate Kenny Lofton's boom box. Belle liked the clubhouse temperature below 60 degrees, and when a teammate once tried to turn up the heat, Belle walked over, turned the thermostat back down, and then smashed it with a bat. This led his teammates to nickname him "Mr. Freeze" (apparently "Mr. What the Fuck Is Wrong With You?!" was taken, possibly by Belle's long-time Cleveland teammate Manny Ramirez).

Finally, after retiring, Belle was arrested for and eventually pled guilty to stalking a woman whom he had hired as an escort; he attached a GPS device to her car and obtained her phone records. For this, he was sentenced to 90 days in jail.

Albert Belle was a crazy motherfucker.

Dante Bichette

Played: 1988-2001

Teams: Angels, Brewers, Rockies, Red, Red Sox
191+ Hit Seasons: 3 (1995, 1996, 1998)

Bichette was a mullet-wearing accused steroid user (he was mentioned in the Mitchell Report) who made his name by being lucky enough to spend seven seasons playing in the hitter's paradise known as Coors Field. (For his career, he had a 162-game average of .358, 45 HR and 178 RBI at Coors, and .279, 20 HR and 87 RBI everywhere else.) And in 1992, when he was 28, the 6-foot-3, 225-pound Bichette admitted to hitting his 19-year-old girlfriend, who was pregnant at the time.

Dante Bichette was a real sack of crap.

Wade Boggs

Played: 1982-1999

Teams: Red Sox, Yankees, Devil Rays
191+ Hit Seasons: 7 (1983-89)

Any discussion of Boggs has to start with his superstitions. In general, baseball players are an overly superstitious bunch, prone to rituals and lucky garments, but Boggs took it into the realm of parody. He ate chicken before every game, believing that chicken was the only food that could get him hits. He also woke up at the same time every morning, always took exactly 150 ground balls in infield practice, and for night games, took batting practice at 5:17 and ran sprints at 7:17. He walked the same path from the dugout to his position at third base and back again every inning, and drew the Hebrew word "Chai," which means "life," in the dirt of the batter's box before every at-bat. It's remarkable he had any mental energy left to actually play baseball.

In contrast to that discipline was Boggs's legendary beer consumption. Many of his ex-teammates have shared anecdotes about it, including claims from multiple players that he would often finish off 70 or more beers over the course of a weekend roadtrip, and that he once drank 64 beers on a cross-country flight, a rumor Boggs has hemmed and hawed about, but never really flat-out denied.

But it was a woman named Margo Adams that really put Boggs on the ridiculous behavior map. Boggs, who was married with two children, had a four-year affair with Adams that ended when she found out he had cheated on her with additional women. (Consistency is the hallmark of a great hitter.) So in 1989, Adams filed a 12 million dollar lawsuit for emotional distress and breach of oral contract, claiming that Boggs had promised to compensate her for lost income and "services performed" on road trips. The ensuing legal battle led to the airing of a lot of dirty laundry in the press, including Adams's claim that Boggs had compromising photos of several of his teammates (How? Why?), and that

he hit better when she attended games (compared to when his wife attended) – and particularly well when Adams attended sans underwear. It's one thing to cheat on your wife, but to have data that shows that your spirit is so crushed when she's around that your performance actually suffers, well... there's no Hallmark card to smooth that one over.

Wade Boggs was a shithead.

Ty Cobb

Played: 1905-28

Teams: Tigers, Athletics
191+ Hit Seasons: 12 (1907, 1909-12, 1915-17, 1919, 1921-22, 1924)

One of the greatest hitters in baseball history, Cobb is remembered just as frequently for his outrageously nasty disposition (including being a fairly well-known racist) as he is for his bat. He was involved in numerous fights during his career, both on and off the field, as well as several profanity-laced shouting matches. Cobb once physically fought with a black groundskeeper over the condition of the Tigers' spring training field. And when the man's wife tried to intervene, he started choking her. Another time, Cobb and an umpire, after arguing during a game, made arrangements to fight under the grandstands after the game. Spectators had to break up the scuffle after Cobb had knocked the umpire to the ground, pinned him, and started choking him (apparently his go-to move, and hereafter known as "Cobbing" or "Giving him the ol' Cobber!"). He also once slapped a black elevator operator for being "uppity," and when a black night watchman got involved, Cobb pulled out a knife and stabbed him.

But his pièce de résistance of asshole-ery came in 1912, when he assaulted a heckler in the stands during a game in New York. Cobb and the fan, Claude Lueker, traded insults for much of the first half of the game, with Lueker reportedly calling Cobb a "half-nigger." Egged on by his teammates, Cobb climbed into the stands and started beating Lueker, who it turned out was handicapped, having lost all of one hand and three fingers on the other hand in an industrial accident. When members of the crowd pleaded with Cobb to stop beating the man because he had no hands, Cobb replied "I don't care if he has no feet!"

Cobb seemed to hate all of humanity, a worldview that's summed up pretty tidily in the following quote: "Sure, I fought. I had to fight all my life just to survive. They were all against me. Tried every dirty trick to cut me down, but I beat the bastards and left them in the ditch."

Ty Cobb was a sociopathic reprobate.

Steve Garvey

Played: 1969-87

Teams: Dodgers, Padres
191+ Hit Seasons: 7 (1974-80)

Garvey spent his career touting himself as a role model, with a Mr. Clean image, a beautiful family and oft-cited aspirations to become a U.S. Senator after he finished playing baseball. But his wife divorced him later in his career, and two years after retiring, he was forced to admit to fathering children with two different women, after said women filed paternity suits against him. Then he went and married a third woman whom he had not impregnated. (Though not for lack of trying, apparently.) And finally, his first wife then published a tell-all book that painted him as a verbally abusive pathological liar, and at one point compared him to famed serial killer Ted Bundy. She also claimed that he faked migraine headaches to get out of the Army. And perhaps best of all, Margo Adams, the famed mistress of Wade Boggs, told Penthouse magazine that she slept with Garvey, and that he was a better lover than Boggs.

Steve Garvey was a shitbag whore.

Keith Hernandez

Played: 1974-90

Teams: Cardinals, Mets, Indians

191+ Hit Seasons: 2 (1979-80)

It's safe to say Hernandez didn't get along with authority figures. In high school, he sat out his senior year baseball season because of a dispute with a coach. He still managed to get drafted by the Cardinals, but while there, he butted heads with manager Whitey Herzog and other team officials, mostly because he was hopped up on cocaine, as would become clear years later when Hernandez was among the 13 MLB players summoned to testify in the Pittsburgh Drug Trials of 1985. (It's easy to get the impression that the arrogance of the "I'M Keith Hernandez!" persona featured in his famous 1992 guest spot on Seinfeld was little more than a thinly-veiled version of his real self.)

But it wasn't until after retirement that Hernandez really got to showcase his particular brand of outsized ego and unrepentant sexism. In April 2006, while serving as a TV analyst during a Mets-Padres game, he saw Padres massage therapist Kelly Calabrese high-five Mike Piazza in the San Diego dugout after Piazza hit a home run. "Who is the girl in the dugout, with the long hair? What's going on here? You have got to be kidding me. Only player personnel in the dugout." After being informed of Calabrese's position, which allowed her to be in the dugout, Hernandez stuck to his guns: "I won't say that women belong in the kitchen, but they don't belong in the dugout." The incident of course became front-page news, and once the howls of criticism got loud enough, Hernandez finally apologized, but didn't lose any of his smugness, claiming he was only goofing around and adding "You know I am only teasing. I love you gals out there — always have." Classy all the way!

Keith Hernandez was a real prick.

Willie Montanez

Played: 1966-82

Teams: Angels, Phillies, Giants, Braves, Mets, Rangers, Padres, Expos, Pirates

191+ Hit Seasons: 1 (1976)

Montanez had a reputation for being a hot dog, constantly showing up his opponents (this may explain why he played for nine different teams during his career). After hitting home runs, he would trot very slowly around the bases, sometimes shuffling his feet, a practice generally frowned upon (and one that can lead to getting a fastball in your ear). When catching infield fly balls, he would "snatch" the ball out of the air with his gloved hand and quickly shift the glove and ball to the opposite hip, as if putting a gun in a holster. And when playing first base, after receiving an attempted pickoff throw from the pitcher, he would sometimes repeatedly tag the baserunner who had safely returned to base. If these antics were intended to win him favor with the fans, it failed, because seriously, who the fuck remembers Willie Montanez?

Willie Montanez was a jackass.

Alex Rodriguez

Played: 1994-present

Teams: Mariners, Rangers, Yankees

191+ Hit Seasons: 4 (1996, 1998, 2001, 2005)

The only active player on this list, A-Rod is currently one of the game's best hitters, and also one of its more surprisingly despised personalities, given his talent level and success (it doesn't help that he often comes across as whiny and self-obsessed). And over the last four years, he seems to be piling on the hater bait:

In Game 6 of the 2004 American League Championship Series against Boston, Rodriguez hit a slow roller between the pitcher's mound and first base. Red Sox pitcher Bronson Arroyo grabbed the ball and tried to tag A-Rod with his glove. A-Rod slapped the glove, knocking the ball loose, and as it rolled away, he ran to second, and Derek Jeter, who had been on first base, scored. The first base umpire originally called it an error, but after conferring with the other umpires, learned of the slap, which constituted interference, meaning A-Rod was out, and Jeter was back on first. A-Rod's behavior was called everything from "unprofessional" to "girlish".

During spring training in 2007, he "announced" to the press that he and Jeter were no longer close friends. Who does that?

Prior to the 2001 season, when he was a free agent, A-Rod signed a 10-year, 252 million dollar contract, at the time the richest in sports history, that contained a clause that allowed him to opt out after seven seasons. So in October 2007, A-Rod and his agent, Scott Boras (see also: Satan), announced that he would be opting out of his contract to

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become a free agent. Of course, they leaked that information to the press during Game 4 of that year's World Series between the Red Sox and Rockies (the story broke mid-game), causing a justifiable uproar over the fact that the news stole attention from the pinnacle event of the baseball season.

This year, he went through a nasty divorce with his wife, during which he clumsily carried on a budding relationship with Madonna, one of the worst-kept secrets in the history of secrets. (Also, environmentalists believe the narcissism levels of this pairing are toxic within a seventeen-mile radius – good luck, New Yorkers!)

There's the following unbelievably tin-eared and vain quote: "When people write [bad things] about me, I don't know if it's [because] I'm good-looking, I'm biracial, I make the most money, I play on the most popular team..."

Finally, have you seen that new "Guitar Hero World Tour" commercial? I mean, come on.

Alex Rodriguez is a complete and utter douchebag.

Pete Rose

Played: 1963-1986

Teams: Reds, Phillies, Expos

191+ Hit Seasons: 13 (1965-66, 1968-73, 1975-79)

Rose's infractions are well known: he bet on baseball games while he was a player/manager for the Reds, which is against baseball rules because it kinda sorta interferes with the whole "integrity of the competition" thing. Rose claims he never bet against his own team, but he also lied about betting in the first place for 15 years, only finally admitting it when he had put it in a book and could make money off of it, so in terms of credibility, he makes Jose Canseco look like Judge Freaking Reinhold. In general, Rose has demonstrated a fever for money that would make Donald Trump blush, whether he's charging money to sign your baseball/speak at your event/appear at your grand opening/breathe your air, or hoarding money via tax evasion, which he was convicted of in 1990 (he served five months in medium security prison).

Pete Rose was a lying S.O.B.

Garry Templeton

Played: 1976-91

Teams: Cardinals, Padres, Mets

191+ Hit Seasons: 2 (1977, 1979)

Templeton caused controversy in 1979 when, despite having arguably the best stats of any National League shortstop, he was not selected to start in the All-Star Game. He was named as a reserve, but refused to attend, saying "If I ain't startin', I ain't departin'!" (Which rivals "Operation Shutdown" as one of the great spoiled, full-of-shit baseball player quotes of the modern era.) A few years later, when Templeton had fallen

out of favor with Cardinals fans (go figure), he made an obscene gesture to some fans that had been heckling him. He was pulled from the game, and shipped out of town after the season was over.

Garry Templeton was kind of a dick.
